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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUBLIN 000044

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TAGS: PREL PGOV EUN EI
SUBJECT: TOUGH CAMPAIGN AHEAD FOR EU REFORM TREATY

REFERENDUM IN IRELAND

REF: 07 DUBLIN 849

Classified By: DCM Robert J. Faucher; Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Director of the EU Division at the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs is optimistic that the EU Reform Treaty referendum will pass in 2008, but not without a robust campaign by Treaty supporters. While there will be a lot of rhetoric and hand-wringing in coming months, we agree that the result should be a "Yes" vote. End summary.

¶2. (U) During her visit to Ireland January 18, EUR/WE Office Director Kathy Allegrone met with Department of Foreign Affairs Director General, European Union Division, Daniel Mulhall to discuss the EU Reform Treaty referendum (Reftel). (Note: Ireland is the only EU member state to require a national referendum to approve the Treaty. The Irish government continues to insist that the Treaty be referred to as the "Reform" rather than the "Lisbon" Treaty because it believes the tag "reform" resonates more effectively with the Irish public. End note.) Mulhall began by pointing out the huge benefit -- over 57 billion euro (\$83.3 billion) -- Ireland (a nation of 4.2 million people) has received from the EU since joining in 1973. He noted that Ireland has spent the money wisely and will soon become a net contributor to EU coffers.

¶3. (C) Nonetheless, Mulhall said, euro-skepticism has crept into the political landscape. People are starting to forget what Ireland's economy was like before it joined the EU, he mused. (Note: Ireland has one of the youngest populations in the EU; in 2006 two-thirds of Ireland's population was under 45.) Some people, he said, are worried about increasing globalization, immigration, and drift toward a more federalized EU, and would like to put on the brakes. He noted that current opponents of the Reform Treaty -- most notably Libertas, a newly formed European movement against the Treaty -- are much more sophisticated than past foes. Libertas, for example, he said, purports to be pro-EU and pro-business, but anti-Treaty, feeding on fears that Ireland will become burdened by an excessive concentration of power in Brussels, increasing EU bureaucracy and regulation, lack of EU accountability and transparency, and a loss of its traditional military neutrality through military centralization in Brussels. (Note: Libertas, which appears well organized, recently announced funding for a program to deliver a "No" leaflet to every household in Ireland. End note.)

¶4. (SBU) Mulhall anticipated that the Treaty campaign would be tricky, saying that those in favor of the Treaty would have to counter the sophisticated, credible arguments of opponents and remind the Irish populace of the great benefits to be realized from continued cooperation with the EU. At the moment, Mulhall said, the Irish people have not thought much about the Treaty. He pointed out a January 2008 poll,

which indicated that only four percent of the members of the Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association felt they had enough information about the Treaty and only 12 percent said they would vote in favor of the Treaty today. Mulhall noted that the opponents of the Treaty are currently much more vocal and energetic than Treaty supporters. However, he predicted that Irish public opinion would crystallize in favor of the Treaty as the "Yes" campaign moved into high gear, especially among the "silent majority." (Note: Most political observers expect the referendum to be held in May 2008. End note.)

¶15. (SBU) Mulhall noted that there were some touchstone issues for the Irish that could affect the outcome of the referendum vote. One, he indicated, was the EU Common Agricultural Policy, from which the Irish -- who hold tight to their agricultural heritage -- have benefited immensely. Any indication that the EU intended to reform the CAP before its next scheduled readjustment in 2014, Mulhall stated, would be anathema to the Irish public, as well as the government, and would play into the hands of Treaty opponents.

¶16. (SBU) Mulhall noted that one difficulty for the "Yes" supporters would be actually getting out the vote on election day, saying that opponents of the Treaty would likely be more motivated to take the trouble to vote than supporters. Since, under Irish law the Government cannot campaign in favor of the Treaty, it is up to the governing coalition's political parties to fund a "Yes" vote campaign and get out the vote. Mulhall said that the Treaty debate doesn't lend itself easily to traditional Irish politics, where candidates for office make great efforts to meet their constituents, including campaigning door-to-door. He anticipated that there would be reluctance to campaign in the same way for the Treaty, which might reduce the effectiveness of the "Yes"

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campaign.

¶17. (U) In the meantime, the Coalition Green Party was unable to muster enough support at a special convention on January 19 to take a position in favor of the Treaty. Though the Treaty is strongly supported by Green Party leadership, a two-thirds majority of those attending the convention was required to enable the party to campaign for the Treaty. The vote was 63 percent in favor, leaving the Green Party officially neutral during the campaign and removing one source of political funding and support. (Note: Thirteen additional votes would have been enough to push the party over the two-thirds hurdle. End note.)

¶18. (C) Comment: In the end, Mulhall was optimistic that the referendum would pass, saying that a "Yes" vote is needed so that the EU can get on with the normal business of serving the people of Europe. He stated that a "No" result in the referendum, coupled with anticipated approval of the Treaty by all other 26 EU member states, would create a political crisis for Ireland. Such an outcome, he predicted, would not unfold favorably for Ireland. From our perspective, it's hard to fathom that the supporters of the Treaty will not win out. The Green Party vote notwithstanding, all the major political parties -- including the Opposition -- support the Treaty. The government, though required to be officially neutral by the Supreme Court, is in favor of the Treaty as well, and will be transmitting that message in subtle (and not so subtle) ways. The startling result of the first referendum on the EU Nice Treaty in June 2001, which was defeated, should ensure a lack of complacency on the part of Treaty supporters. While there will be a lot of rhetoric and hand-wringing in coming months, the result should be a "Yes" vote.

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